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## Brace for a steep re-learning curve

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**Kevin Rudd's education revolution will take more than laptops in high schools, argues Mark Pesce.**

EARLIER this year, a secondary school teacher from Adelaide told me about his physics class. "I was lecturing about current topics in physics," he said, "when one of my students corrected me." One of the theories he quoted had been recently disproved by an experiment, the results of which were reported in Wikipedia. The student, with one ear to the lecture and one eye on the universal web encyclopedia, helpfully provided the update. "How can I stay ahead of the kids?" he wondered. It's a fair question, and goes to the heart of the incoming Rudd Government's proposal to bring computers to secondary school students.

If we simply drop laptops into the schools and hope it all works out, we're in for a big disappointment. At present, the computer has a small role in the secondary school curriculum, which was designed long before personal computers, the internet or high-speed broadband. The classroom exists entirely outside the hyperactive media sphere that teenagers today inhabit every other moment they're awake. (An average 15-year-old girl sends 100 text messages a day.) While this guarantees that the classroom is a calm and steady space for instruction, it also means that the wealth of human knowledge, now instantaneously available almost everywhere, has been locked outside. The classroom is now seen by students as increasingly irrelevant to the real world. But the laptops are coming anyway — that's a core Rudd promise.

Although much of the talk in the first days will be about costings and support and maintenance and reliability, that's not the real issue here. Those are all fixable problems. The bigger problems are the lack of teacher training and the fundamental mismatch between a 20th-century curriculum and its associated pedagogy, and 21st-century learning. Teachers are overworked, underpaid, time-poor and overcommitted. They may have enormous influence over the minds of their students, but they have little control over the curriculum.

Although they do get some rather limited professional development time, only a minority of them are as adept in computing as their students. Most teachers are digital immigrants, struggling to croak out a few words, while their students are fluent natives, rabbiting on in a language most teachers only haltingly understand. Dropping computers into that mix precariously flips the balance of power from teachers to students, unless educators are given the resources and the opportunity to re-educate themselves. That's an additional cost that must be factored into the budgets, and it will take time — you can't retrain all teachers overnight. Even that is not enough.

The teachers work from a mandated curriculum that, with very few exceptions, doesn't even entertain the idea of computers and the internet.

The curriculum must be redrawn, so that computers are integrated into it, becoming a potent tool alongside the textbook and the chalkboard. We are miles away from that. There are some intriguing experiments going on: teachers asking students to write an article for Wikipedia, an assignment that marries research skills, knowledge skills, composition skills and technical skills. There's a lot that is possible in this vein, but curriculum designers have to accept the computer as a powerful, flexible, ubiquitous tool that can be integrated into the curriculum's DNA. This is now possible because of the Government's plan, but there are hard yards and long months between where we are now and where we'll need to go. The students are ready for this revolution. The teachers and education departments are not. This initiative seems to raise more questions than answers, and that, I believe, is Mr Rudd's intent. He wants to connect the classroom to the world beyond and laptops are his trojan horse. Once they're in the door, there's no choice but for a curriculum rethink and for teachers to re-train. That can only result in a real education revolution.

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